

## Great Expectations

Just as with President Obama's speech in Cairo last month, his recent visit to Moscow has been dissected and analyzed across the globe. Depending on who you are, or perhaps where you sit, you were looking for different signs and signals from this long-awaited encounter between the top U.S. and Russian officials. Here in Bratislava, during a televised discussion after President Obama's meeting with President Medvedev, a Smer MP called it the single "most important international relations event of the year." At home in the U.S., one particularly critical columnist excoriated the President for concluding what he called a "useless" deal on nuclear weapons.

While I firmly reject the latter critique, I can't say I agree fully with the former characterization, either. The meeting between President Obama and his Russian counterpart should be seen for what it is: an important and necessary step along a continuum. As President Obama stated, a lasting partnership between the U.S. and Russia requires "a sustained effort among the American and Russian people to identify mutual interests, and expand dialogue and cooperation." Having served in Moscow and worked for several years in Washington on U.S.-Russian relations, I agree wholeheartedly.

Presidents Obama and Medvedev set the stage for meaningful progress on several key global challenges: nuclear non-proliferation and security and stability in Afghanistan. Today, as we face the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea and struggle to halt Iran's steady march in that direction, there is no issue on which joint, effective leadership is more essential than nuclear proliferation. With respect to Afghanistan, the two Presidents affirmed their commitment to the common fight in Afghanistan against terrorism, armed extremism and illegal drug trafficking, and to strengthening the capabilities of the Afghan National Army and police. This is good news not only for Afghanistan, but also for all of us engaged in efforts to promote security and stability there.

As in Cairo, President Obama did not shy away from addressing issues on which we differ with Russia. In his keynote speech, President Obama stated unequivocally that Georgia and Ukraine's territorial independence and sovereignty must be respected.

President Obama also explained the U.S. interest in democratic governments that protect the rights of their people. "By no means is America perfect," he acknowledged, but U.S. commitment to certain universal values, e.g, freedom of speech, rule of law, equal administration of justice, independent media and competitive elections, have strengthened the U.S. The President added that "governments that promote rule of law, subject their actions to oversight, and allow for independent institutions are more dependable trading partners. And in our own history, democracies have been America's most enduring allies."

Meeting with representatives of Russian civil society, President Obama stressed the centrality of a vibrant civil society in fostering change. "Make no mistake: civil society holds their governments to high standards. I know because this group includes Americans who have been critical of me for not moving fast enough on issues of great importance. They've said it to my face; they told me I was wrong. And in some cases they changed my mind; in some cases they didn't. And that's okay, because we are not going to agree on everything, but I know this: Their voices...and their criticism ultimately will make my decisions better." While I would qualify President Obama's visit as a success, I also understand that the change he has called for requires sustained, hard work.

Almost fifty years ago, President Kennedy called for a new approach between the Cold War superpowers: "Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace - - based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions - -on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. For peace is a process, a way of solving problems."

So now that the long-awaited visit is over, we must continue the work we've begun to meet shared challenges. The U.S. is committed to this process -- which will require the efforts of many people beyond the borders of Russia and the United States -- and to achieving concrete results.